

Don't Waste Your Brain: Cultivating a Robust Theology for Christian Living

Romans 12:1-2 ESV I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. (2) Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Hebrews 5:12-14 ESV For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food, (13) for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. (14) But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.

We live in an age of what I have called “watered-down” Christianity. The Christian faith has been watered down to a few overly cheesy and rather saccharine phrases like “God loves you” and “God has a wonderful plan for your life”. As a Reformed Christian, I often get asked why do I seem to get so riled up by bad theology and why am I so insistent on a sound theology for Christians, so what I hope to do in this article is to look what the Bible says about doctrine and suggest some steps to cultivating a robust theology for your Christian life.

Now the word “doctrine” or “teaching” (depending on what translation you use), as found in the NT, is a translation of two distinct words:

1. The first word is *didaskalia* – “the act of teaching” (1Ti 4:13, 1Ti 4:16; 1Ti 5:17; 2Ti 3:10, 2Ti 3:16)
2. The second word is *didache* – “what is taught” (Joh 7:16, Joh 7:17; Rev 2:14, Rev 2:15, Rev 2:24)

The earliest mention of doctrine in the NT is Matthew 7:28-29:

Matthew 7:28-29 ESV And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, (29) for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.

Even from the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry, we find our Lord and Saviour teaching doctrine. We have full records of teachings he gave in such passages as Matthew 5-7, Matthew 24, Mark 13, Luke 21 and John 13-16 to name but a few. In fact, Jesus makes one of the most profound statements regarding the necessity of true doctrine and its relation to practical Christian living:

John 7:16-17 ESV So Jesus answered them, "My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me. (17) If anyone's will is to do God's will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority.

Thus we can clearly see that Jesus felt that one's doctrine was tied to his desire to do the will of God – a very telling statement considering the lack of care as to one's doctrine that we find in the Body of Christ nowadays. Following on, the example of the Lord Jesus, the Apostles again went to work teaching doctrine to the newly formed church:

Acts 2:42 ESV And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

Paul, in particular, makes a number of statements regarding doctrine which it would be worthwhile to consider as we consider what the Bible has to say about doctrine:

a) Doctrine is big enough as an issue to separate over:

Romans 16:17 ESV *I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them.*

2 Thessalonians 3:14 ESV *If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed.*

b) Doctrine is directly related to the preservation of a pastor and those who hear him

1 Timothy 4:16 ESV *Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.*

c) Doctrine is directly related to one's salvation

Romans 6:16-17 ESV *Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? (17) But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed,*

2 John 1:9 ESV *Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son.*

From just these three propositions alone, we see the weight that the New Testament places on doctrine, and so we must now ask the question: "If theology is so important, then how do I develop a Biblical theology which leads to a more robust Christian life?" Well, I'd like to give you a few pointers in developing a robust theology.

Firstly, get a Bible and begin to study it. The most important book you will read in theology is your Bible, so dig into it. Perhaps as you read this, you've never truly gotten into the habit of Bible study so here are a few pointers:

- a) **Take the Bible literally:** As you work through the Biblical text, bear in mind you are reading a piece of literature, for example a newspaper. You won't pick up a Metro and start finding spiritualized meanings behind particular words and phrases. Likewise, when you come to the Bible, simply let the words on the page speak for themselves. One of my favourite Bible teachers, the late Dr. David L. Cooper, noted what he called *The Golden Rule of Biblical Interpretation*:

When the plain sense of Scripture makes common sense, seek no other sense; therefore, take every word, at its primary, ordinary, usual, literal meaning unless the facts of the immediate context, studied in the light of related passages and axiomatic and fundamental truths, indicate clearly otherwise.

Even I find that a bit long – read the Bible literally and read it in context, which leads to my second point

- b) **Read the Bible in context:** I find this to be a problem with a lot of people I speak to. They simply read a verse, spiral off into all sorts of foolishness, all the while, there are reams of verses which completely flatten the concept they are teaching. Read the Bible in three contexts:
- a. **The context of the chapter:** I see this a lot when people quote Isaiah 10:27. It's a prophecy to the nation of Israel as verses 1-26 bears out, yet I have never witnessed a contextual understanding of this verse and so the wackiness continues.
 - b. **The context of the book:** Oftentimes when you read the Bible, you come across something in the book you are studying which may clarify what that one verse was teaching.
 - c. **The context of the testament:** Try to bear in mind that in the OT, the focus was on the nation of Israel, while in the New Testament, the emphasis on the true Israel of God (Gal 6:16), all of God's people of all nations. Bearing what I call "the continental divide of Scripture" in mind is helpful when you study the Word
- c) **Be aware of literary forms:** While we interpret the Bible literally, we should bear in mind that there are poetic, figurative, metaphorical and parabolic forms and that each of these can influence the meaning of a verse, chapter or even a book.
- d) **Practice exegesis:** My good friend Galyn Wiemers explains this in his book *Framework for Christian Faith*:

Exegesis comes from two words: *ex* which means "out" and *hegeisthai* which means "to lead or to guide". The concept is "to guide out" of the literature what is already there. Allow the words to tell you what it means instead of making the words mean what you want. Exposition is a setting forth of the meaning or purpose of a document. The opposite is eisegesis which also comes from two words: *eis* which means "into" and, again, *hegeisthai*. Eisegesis is the improper method of interpretation because the reader is "leading" or "guiding" their own thoughts and ideas "into" the written document.

- e) **Recognize the difference between historical narrative and instructional literature:** I first heard this from R.C. Sproul. He used the example of women preachers – people will try to work around 1 Timothy 2:11-15 because of Deborah, rather than looking at Deborah in light of 1 Tim 2:11-15. Instructional or teaching literature explains what happens in narrative.

A great resource I can recommend in terms of practical Bible study methods is a teaching series done by my friend Trevor Hammack of Victory Baptist Church on How to Study the Bible, which you can download in MP3 here: <http://tinyurl.com/bstudy>

Secondly, start reading wholesome teaching materials. Here are some basic things I'd recommend to help you in developing a sound theology:

- **A study Bible:** Dr. R. Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, gave some insights into getting a study Bible:

1. Read the text of the Bible first. Meditate upon the text and read it with care. Apply your own knowledge of the Bible in order to understand the particular text within its context and place in the biblical story-line.

Consider and note other texts that come to your mind as directly related to this text. Read the text with full attention and conviction.

2. Look carefully at the cross-references that the study Bible links to the text you are reading. Do not look only to the citations, but read the actual passages. This assistance is still the main contribution of a study Bible -- making related and parallel passages more accessible. A first principle of interpreting the Bible is to interpret the Bible by the Bible. In other words, allowing the Bible to interpret itself text by text.

Two study Bibles I'd recommend to you are the ESV Study Bible (www.esvstudybible.org) and the NLT Study Bible (www.nltstudybible.org)

- **A Bible commentary:** A Bible commentary basically explains Biblical passages, providing an exegesis of the text as well as an explanation of key issues such as theological implications and historical context. A good commentary I can recommend is the Expositor's Bible Commentary, Abridged Edition, which comes in two volumes.
- **A Bible dictionary:** A good Bible dictionary will explain Biblical terminology, putting it in its historical and Biblical context and explaining the implications of that word's use. The one I used is Smith's Bible Dictionary, but there are many other options available to the eager student.
- **A systematic theology:** A systematic theology is the final tool I'd like to mention. What it does is to take a Biblical doctrine and ask the question "What does the whole Bible have to say on that topic?" Systematic theology books vary in their depth and difficulty, as well in their doctrinal faithfulness (One example of an absolutely horrid one is Charles Finney's Systematic Theology – denied original sin, justification by faith, the imputation of Christ's righteousness, etc.). A couple I'd like to recommend to you are *Systematic Theology* by Wayne Grudem and *Basic Theology* by Charles Ryrie.

Now at this point, you may be thinking this is a lot of work to simply understand the Bible but bear in mind the benefits that spring from investing a little time and money in developing a robust theology. It is my hope that after 2,000 words, I've imparted a bit of my desire for you not to "waste your brain, but for you to do what many have begun to doing nowadays: cultivating a robust theology which fuels a faithful Christian life.

Postscript (March 15, 2009):

Last night, I found myself catching up on blog posts from [Reclaiming the Mind Ministries](#) and one post in particular by C. Michael Patton, who heads up the ministry of RMM, discussing the (artificial) divide between belief and practice/experience. As I read the post, it resonated powerfully with me, but then I noted the comment thread, always a bittersweet experience when you read a blog post.

One commenter who shall remain nameless was clearly unhappy with many of Dr. Patton's assertions about the importance of sound doctrine. In fact, after looking at her blog, I could figure out why she was so unimpressed by thoughts of orthodoxy and orthopraxy – she had embraced the (contradictory) idea of Christian post-modernism, which commonly flies under the banner of the Emergent Church. While I am not devoting this postscript to a discussion of the Emergent Church (there are more competent men who have dealt with it), I do want to dwell on this artificial divide between doctrine and living.

Allow me to use a pitiful analogy. I'm currently preparing to take my driving theory test, so cars are pretty heavy on the mind these days. Let us assume for the purpose of analogy that I own a Hummer (I know, it's a little unreal, but I like the Hummer). Now the Hummer is a beast – now imagine that I climb (literally) into the Hummer and then make the awesome action of putting my key in the ignition to start up. Now everything I need for

movement and travel has been given to me – the internal combustion engine, the tyres, the gears, it's all there. BUT if there is no FUEL in my car and I don't know how to drive, that awesome Hummer WON'T GO ANYWHERE!

I make that very weird analogy to point out something about the Christian life. The Bible is plain: God has given us everything we need:

2Pe 1:3 His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence,

Now I have heard the first part of that verse so many times I can quote it from memory (and often do when I discuss sola Scriptura) – however note the SECOND part of that verses. God, through the agency of His divine power, has given us EVERYTHING we need for life and godliness in THE KNOWLEDGE OF HIM. Coming back to my car analogy, God has given us the car to travel in AND the capacity to learn how to drive.

I am often asked by fellow young people why I am so committed BOTH to radical, one-on-one evangelism AND doctrinal reformation. My reply has changed dramatically over the last two years. At first, my answer was something along the line of “Folks, there is so much BUNK in the church, and we can't trust the existing churches to do the job”. I was right in saying that of a lot of churches I have had the [dis]privilege of attending or visiting over the years, but that doesn't do the question much in the way of justice. Most people understand why I am passionate about evangelization and missions – but often I need to explain my passion for doctrinal reformation.

God gave us the Bible – of that I am sure there is no debate (unless you happen to be that deluded fellow Rob Bell who simultaneously says he believes the Bible to be inspired, but also says that the Bible is a human product, not the result of divine fiat – a logical conclusion if you embrace a general uncertainty about everything). Of course, one would then need to ask what was God's purpose. Most will describe the Bible as “God's love letter”, which I have no real concern with. For the unsearchable God to reveal Himself is indeed an expression of love. But doesn't Scripture tell us that the Bible is given for doctrine, reproof, correction and INSTRUCTION in righteousness. The Bible is not a member of some amorphous conversation – it leads the conversation (if there is truly a conversation taking place, which I doubt. Those who wish to converse more often than not wish to converse over things which aren't up for discussion, but again this is not a discussion of the Emergent Church)

Having a knowledge of Scripture beyond “Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so” (I'm not disparaging the soul – I still sing it at 18) isn't elevating knowledge over relationship – it's acknowledging that without the Word of God, I would know NOTHING about my Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ! Think through the logic of this with me for a moment. Without the Bible, would we know ANYTHING about Jesus? Well, sure we could look up Josephus, Tacitus, Pliny and the like to prove He actually existed, but what would we know of His teachings, His life, the miracles He performed and His work for our redemption?

Granted – the Bible is not a systematic theology textbook, and it isn't written like one, but isn't systematic theology nothing more than arranging the teachings of Scripture in a coherent way? It is hardly adding to the Bible or denigrating it – it's simply making the topics of the Bible a little easier to get your arms around, and yes, I truly appreciate that one may never fully come to know every detail of every doctrine in this life – we're not perfect, but it does mean that we will have a deeper understanding of the Word of Almighty God, and so we will have a deeper relationship with Him. Doctrine isn't the enemy of relationship – the two walk hand in hand...

Yours in the love of the truth,

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